



2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen

Strasbourg, 10 September 2025



The original version of the speech is available [here](#).

"Check against delivery"

President Metsola,

Honourable Members,

Europe is in a fight. A fight for a continent that is whole and at peace. For a free and independent Europe. A fight for our values and our democracies. A fight for our liberty and our ability to determine our destiny for ourselves. Make no mistake – this is a fight for our future.

I thought long and hard about whether to start this State of the Union address with such a stark appraisal. After all, we Europeans are not used to – or comfortable with – talking in such terms. Because our Union is fundamentally a peace project. But the truth is that the world of today is unforgiving. And we cannot varnish over the difficulties that Europeans feel every day. They can feel the ground shift beneath them. They can feel things getting harder just as they are working harder. They can feel the impact of the global crisis. Of the higher cost of living. They feel the speed of change affecting their lives and careers. And they worry about the endless spiral of events they see on the news – from the devastating scenes in Gaza to the relentless Russian barrage on Ukraine.

We simply cannot wait for this storm to pass. This summer showed us that there is simply no room or time for nostalgia. Battlelines for a new world order based on power are being drawn right now. So, yes, Europe must fight. For its place in a world in which many major powers are either ambivalent or openly hostile to Europe. A world of imperial ambitions and imperial wars. A world in which dependencies are ruthlessly weaponised. And it is for all of these reasons that a new Europe must emerge.

Honourable Members,

This must be Europe's Independence Moment. I believe this is our Union's mission. To be able to take care of our own defence and security. To take control over the technologies and energies that will fuel our economies. To decide what kind of society and democracy we want to live in. To be open to the world and choose partnerships with allies - old and new. Ultimately, it is about having the freedom and the power to determine our own destiny. And we know we can do it. Because together we have shown what is possible when we have the same ambition, unity and urgency.

I have lost count of the number of times that I was told that Europe could not do this or that. During the pandemic. On the recovery plan. On defence. On supporting Ukraine. On energy security. The list goes on. Every time – Europe stood united and made it. And we need to do the same now.

So, Honourable Members, the central question for us today is a simple one. Does Europe have the stomach for this fight? Do we have the unity and the sense of urgency? The political will and the political skill to compromise? Or do we want to just fight between ourselves? To be paralysed by our divisions. This is what all of us have to answer – every Member State, every Member of this House, every Commissioner.

All of us. In my eyes the choice is clear. So my pitch today is a pitch for unity. Unity between Member States. Unity between EU institutions. Unity between the pro-European democratic forces in this House. I am here – and the entire College is here - ready to make this happen with you. Ready to strengthen the pro-European democratic majority. **Because it is the only one that can deliver for Europeans.**

Honourable Members,

Freedom and independence are what the people of Ukraine are fighting for today. People like Sasha and his grandmother. Sasha was only 11 years old when the Russians attacked. He and his mother sought refuge in a basement in their town of Mariupol. One morning, they went out to get some food. That's when all hell broke loose. A rain of Russian bombs, on a civilian neighbourhood. All became dark and Sasha felt his face burning. He had shrapnel just below his eyes. In a matter of days, Russian soldiers stormed the city. They took Sasha and his mum to what the Russians called a "filtration camp". Then Sasha was taken away. They told him he didn't need his mum. He would go to Russia, and have a Russian mother. A Russian passport. A Russian name. They sent him to occupied Donetsk. But Sasha didn't give up.

On a stop on the way, he asked to borrow a stranger's phone. And he called his grandma, Liudmyla, who was living in free Ukraine. "Baba, just take me home." She didn't hesitate a second. Her friends told her she was crazy to go. But Liudmyla moved mountains to get to him. With the help of the Ukrainian government, she travelled to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and finally into occupied Ukraine. She got Sasha back.

And through the same long journey, brought him to safety. But their hearts are still broken. Every single day they keep fighting to find Sasha's mum – stuck somewhere by Russia's brutal war. I would like to thank Sasha and Liudmyla for allowing me to share their story. I am honoured that they are here with us today.

Honourable Members,

Please join me in paying tribute to Sasha, to Liudmyla, and to Ukraine's relentless fight for freedom. Sadly, Sasha's story is far from unique. There are tens of thousands more Ukrainian children whose fate is unknown. Trapped. Threatened. Forced to deny their identities. We must do everything in our power to support Ukraine's children. This is why I can announce that, together with Ukraine and other partners, I will host a **Summit of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. Every abducted child must be returned.**

Honourable members,

This war needs to end with a just and lasting peace for Ukraine. Because Ukraine's freedom is Europe's freedom. The images in Alaska were not easy to digest. But just a few days later, Europe's Leaders came to Washington to support President Zelenskyy and secure commitments. Real progress has been made since then.

Just last week 26 countries in the Coalition of the Willing said they were ready to be part of a reassurance force in Ukraine or participate financially – in the context of a ceasefire. We will continue to support all diplomatic efforts to end this war. But we have all seen what Russia means by "diplomacy". Putin refuses to meet President Zelenskyy. Last week, Russia launched the largest number of drones and ballistic missiles in a single attack. Yesterday, there was a missile attack on a village in Donetsk, targeting people waiting to pick up their pensions. More than 20 were killed.

And just today we have seen a reckless and unprecedented violation of Poland's and Europe's air space by more than 10 Russian drones. **Europe stands in full solidarity with Poland.** Putin's

message is clear. And our response must be clear too. We need more pressure on Russia to come to the negotiating table. We need more sanctions. We are now working on the 19th package in coordination with partners. We are particularly looking at phasing out Russian fossil fuels faster, the shadow fleet and third countries. And at the same time we need more support for Ukraine. No one has contributed as much as Europe. Close to EUR 170 billion of military and financial aid so far. More will be needed. And it should not only be European taxpayers who bear the brunt of this. **This is Russia's war. And it is Russia that should pay.**

This is why we need to work urgently on a new solution to finance Ukraine's war effort on the basis of the immobilised Russian assets. With the cash balances -associated to these Russian assets, we can provide Ukraine with a Reparations Loan. The assets themselves will not be touched. And the risk will have to be carried collectively. Ukraine will only pay back the loan once Russia pays for the reparations. The money will help Ukraine already today.

But it will also be crucial in the mid- and long-term for Ukraine's security. For example, funding for strong Ukrainian armed forces as the first line of security guarantees. We will propose a new programme. We call it **Qualitative Military Edge**. It will support investment in the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces. Take drones for an example. Before the war, Ukraine had none. Today, it is Ukraine's use of drones that is accounting for over two thirds of Russian equipment losses. That is not just an edge on the battlefield. It is a reminder of the power of human ingenuity in our open societies. But Russia is catching up fast, supported by Iranian designed Shahed drones. And it is seizing the advantage of industrial mass production.

Saturday, in one single night, Russia sent 800 drones to Ukraine. So ingenuity helped to open a door for Ukraine's defence. But raw industrial might, on the other side may threaten to sweep it closed. So we can use our industrial strength to support Ukraine to counter this drone warfare. We can help transform Ukrainian ingenuity into battlefield advantage – and into joint industrialisation. This is why I can also announce that Europe will frontload EUR 6 billion from the ERA loan and enter into a **Drone Alliance with Ukraine**. Ukraine has the ingenuity. What it needs now is scale. And together, we can provide it: so that Ukraine keeps its edge, and Europe strengthens its own.

Honourable members,

Putin's war economy will not stop, even if the war does. That means Europe must be ready to take responsibility for its own security. Of course, NATO will always be essential. But only a strong and credible European defence posture will be able to guarantee our security. We have made historic progress in recent years to build our European Defence Union.

Earlier this year, we launched Readiness 2030 which could unlock up to EUR 800 billion of defence investment. This includes the SAFE programme that is now ready to provide EUR 150 billion for joint procurement. 19 Member States have already applied. The programme is already at full capacity. Which is good news. We are also working to find a way to grant a bonus to those who support Ukraine or buy Ukrainian equipment. This is emergency financial assistance responding to an urgent need.

Last week, I saw this for myself when I visited frontline Member States. They know best the threat Russia poses. And there is no doubt: Europe's eastern flank keeps all of Europe safe. From the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. This is why we must invest in supporting it through an **Eastern Flank Watch**. This means giving Europe independent strategic capabilities. We must invest in real-time space surveillance so that no movement of forces goes unseen. We must heed the call of our Baltic friends and build a drone wall. This is not an abstract ambition. It is the bedrock of credible defence. A European capability developed together, deployed together, and sustained together, that can respond in real time. One that leaves no ambiguity as to our intentions. **Europe will defend every inch of its territory.**

In every country I visited, I heard the same message: there is no time to waste. At the next European Council, we will therefore present a clear **roadmap**. For getting **new common defence projects** off the ground. For setting clear goals for 2030. And for creating a **European Defence Semester**. 2030 is tomorrow. So Europe must get ready today.

Honourable Members,

When we talk about independence, we are talking about choosing our destiny. That is what Ukraine is fighting for. And that is what all Europeans deserve. Because Europe is an idea – the idea of freedom and mutual strength. This was the idea that drove the post-1989 generation. When East and West

came together. And it is as powerful now as it was then. This is why we are bringing future Member States closer to our Union. Investing. Supporting reforms. Integrating into the Single Market. We must keep up the speed on this merits-based process. Because only a united – and a reunited – Europe can be an independent Europe. A larger and stronger Union is a security guarantee for all of us. And because for Ukraine, for Moldova, for the Western Balkans – their future is in our Union. Let's make **the next reunification** of Europe happen.

Honourable Members,

What is happening in Gaza has shaken the conscience of the world. People killed while begging for food. Mothers holding lifeless babies. These images are simply catastrophic. So I want to start with a very clear message: Man-made famine can never be a weapon of war. For the sake of the children, for the sake of humanity – this must stop.

This is also part of a more systematic shift in the last months that is simply unacceptable. We have seen the financial suffocation of the Palestinian Authority. The plans for a settlement project in the so-called E1 area which would essentially cut off the occupied West Bank from East Jerusalem. The actions and statements by the most extremist ministers of the Israeli government which incite violence. All of this points to a clear attempt to undermine the two-state solution. To undermine the vision of a viable Palestinian state and we must not let that happen.

Honourable Members,

It truly pains me to say these words. And I know that for many citizens, Europe's inability to agree on a common way forward is equally painful. They are asking how much worse things must get before there is unity of response. I understand. Because what is happening in Gaza is unacceptable. And because Europe must lead the way – just as it has done before. Our financial support and humanitarian aid far outweigh that of any other partner. Our commitment to a viable Palestinian Authority is keeping a two-state solution alive. And we must urge others to urgently step up too – both in the region and beyond.

But, of course, Europe needs to do more. Many Member States have moved ahead on their own. On our side, we proposed to suspend parts of our Horizon funding. But this is stuck without a majority. We must overcome this. We cannot afford to be paralysed. This is why I will propose a package of measures to carve out a way forward.

First, the Commission will do all that it can on its own. We will put our bilateral support to Israel on hold. We will stop all payments in these areas - without affecting our work with Israeli civil society or Yad Vashem.

Second, we will make two further proposals to the Council. We will propose sanctions on the extremist ministers and on violent settlers. And we will also propose a partial suspension of the Association Agreement on trade-related matters. I am aware it will be difficult to find majorities. And I know that any action will be too much for some. Too little for others. But we must all take our own responsibilities – Parliament, Council and Commission.

Thirdly, we will set up a Palestine Donor Group next month – including a dedicated instrument for Gaza reconstruction. This will be an international effort with regional partners. And it will build on the momentum of the New York Conference organised by France and Saudi Arabia.

Honourable Members,

I am a long-standing friend of the people of Israel. I know how much the atrocious attacks on 7 October by Hamas terrorists shook the nation to its core. The hostages have now been held captive by Hamas terrorists for more than 700 days since 7 October. That is 700 days of pain and suffering. There can never be any place for Hamas – neither now, nor in the future. Because they are terrorists who want to destroy Israel. And they are also inflicting terror on their own people. Keeping their future hostage.

Europe's goal has always been the same. Real security for Israel and a safe present and future for all Palestinians. And that means that the hostages must be released. That there should be unrestrained access for all humanitarian aid. And that there must be an immediate ceasefire. But in the longer term, the only realistic peace plan is one based on two States. Living side by side in peace and security. With a secure Israel, a viable Palestinian authority and the scourge of Hamas removed. This

is what Europe has always stood for. And it is time to come together and help make it happen.

Honourable members,

Europe's independence will depend on its ability to compete in today's turbulent times. We have everything it takes to thrive here in Europe – from our Single Market to our social market economy. But we know the economic and geopolitical headwinds are strong. And we have seen how dependencies can be used against us.

This is why we will massively invest in digital and clean tech. With more to come in our future Competitiveness Fund and a doubled Horizon Europe, our research and innovation programme. And we are tackling the key bottlenecks identified by the Draghi report – from energy to capital, investment to simplification.

We have held strategic dialogues with key industries – from cars to chemicals, steel to pharmaceutical, defence to agriculture. In each sector, the message is the same. To protect jobs, we need to make business in Europe easier. And the omnibuses we have put on the table so far will make a real difference. Less paperwork, less overlaps, less complex rules.

Our proposals will cut EUR 8 billion a year of bureaucratic costs for European companies. A digital Euro for example will make it easier for companies and consumers alike. And further omnibuses are on their way – for example on **military mobility or digital**. For innovative companies, we are preparing the so-called **28th regime and speeding up the work on the Savings and Investments Union**. Because we have many high potential startups in key technologies like quantum, AI or biotech. As they grow, the limited availability of risk capital forces them to turn to foreign investors. This is wealth and jobs going elsewhere. And it jeopardises our tech sovereignty. This is why the Commission will partner with private investors on a multi-billion-euro **Scaleup Europe Fund**. It will help make major investments in young, fast-growing companies in critical tech areas. Because we want **the best of Europe to Choose Europe**.

Honourable Members,

Our greatest asset is the Single Market – but it remains unfinished. The IMF estimates that the internal barriers within the Single Market are equivalent to a 45% tariff on goods. And a 110% tariff on services. Just think of what we are missing out on. And, as underscored by the Letta report, the Single Market remains incomplete, mostly in three domains: finance, energy, and telecommunications. We need clear political deadlines. This is why we will present a **Single Market Roadmap to 2028**. On capital, services, energy, telecoms, the 28th regime and the fifth freedom for knowledge and innovation. Only what gets measured, gets done.

Honourable Members,

This will also support our investment in the technologies that will fuel our economy. Clean and digital. Take **artificial intelligence**. A European AI is essential for our future independence. It will help power our industries and our societies. From healthcare to defence. So – we will focus on the first key building blocks – that's from the Cloud and AI Development Act to the Quantum Sandbox.

We are massively investing in European **AI Gigafactories**. They support our innovative start-ups to develop, train, and deploy their next-generation AI models. When we called on the private sector to join forces with us, the response was overwhelming. And later today I will meet CEOs from some of the largest European tech champions. They will hand over their **European AI & Tech Declaration**. This is their commitment to invest in Europe's tech sovereignty. And we must also take the same approach on clean tech – from steel to batteries. Europe's clean tech sector must stay in Europe – and we have to take urgent action.

With the **Clean Industrial Deal**, we have identified the main hurdles that slow down these sectors. We now need to speed up with the implementation. Because investors want to know that if they invest, there will be demand for clean European products. This is why **lead markets** must be at the heart of our action. To spark a virtuous cycle. Where both, supply and demand go up, and prices go down. On the supply side, we will launch a **Battery Booster package**. This will put EUR 1.8 billion up for equity to boost production in Europe. Batteries are a key enabler of other clean tech – especially electric vehicles. So this goes to the heart of our independence. On the demand side, we must urgently drive demand for European industrial leadership in clean tech. This is why we will introduce a “made in Europe” criteria in public procurement. And when we invest in Global Gateway, for example,

we set strong incentives for partners to buy European.

I am convinced: the future of clean tech will continue to be made in Europe. But for that, we also need to make sure that our industry has the materials here in Europe. And the only answer here is creating a truly circular economy. So we need to move faster on the Circular Economy Act. And move ahead in those sectors that are ready. Finally, we need to keep up the speed. So the Commission will propose an **Industrial Accelerator Act** for key strategic sectors and technologies. In sum, when it comes to digital and clean tech: faster, smarter and more European.

Honourable Members,

Already today, low-carbon sources account for over 70% of our electricity. We are global leaders in clean tech patents – better than the US, and racing with China. We are catching up with US venture capital for clean tech – and way ahead of China. We are firmly on track to achieve our 2030 target to cut emissions by at least 55%. This is the power of the European Green Deal. And we must stay the course on our climate and environmental goals.

The science is crystal clear. And the economic and security case is equally compelling. In fact, this transformation is central to our push for independence. Because it reduces our energy dependency. Because circular production limits our strategic dependencies. And because it creates frontrunner industries that can export the solutions to others. When I speak to the Global South, from Africa to India to Central Asia, they are looking for solutions. These are rapidly evolving markets and the jury is still out on who will dominate the markets. We are the ones who can meet this growing demand for solutions. But it is not a given.

This is why the Commission proposed the 2040 targets – ten years after the Paris Agreement. I know that many people are concerned about the scale of what is ahead. This is why the transition must support people and strengthen industry. This also means massively boosting our public and private investment. Creating lead markets for circular and clean products to deliver jobs and investments in Europe.

Ensuring a just transition for all – for example with the Social Climate Fund. Securing the global level playing field, notably by promoting carbon pricing. Europe must protect its industries. They are doing the right thing to decarbonise. And they should be rewarded and incentivised. We otherwise risk relying on importing the steel that our carmakers need or the fertilisers that our farmers need. We would be at the mercy of the price, volume and quality that others are willing and able to provide. Take steel and other metals. Global overcapacity is squeezing margins and leaving little incentive to pay a clean premium. This makes it harder for Europe's steel industry to invest in decarbonisation.

That is why the Commission will propose **a new, long-term trade instrument to succeed the expiring steel safeguards**. Europe will always remain open. We like competition. But we will always protect our industry from unfair competition.

Honourable Members,

When we talk about competitiveness we talk about jobs. We are talking about people and their livelihoods. So the bottom line is that workers must be empowered if we are to have a competitive economy. This is why we will propose a Quality Jobs Act. To ensure that modern employment keeps pace with the modern economy. And this is important because we know how hard times have been for so many families. How costs have rocketed up. How people are making sacrifices to make ends meet. This is a matter of basic social justice.

This is why we urgently need an ambitious **European Anti-Poverty Strategy**. We will lay out our plan to help eradicate poverty by 2050. Backed up by a strong Child Guarantee to shield our children from poverty. We will also put forward a series of packages on **affordability and the cost of living**. Allow me to give you four telling examples.

The first is **energy**. When energy costs rise, it is not just numbers on a bill. It is every single part of people's lives that is affected. So at the height of the energy crisis in the last years, Europe acted. And thanks to that common effort, we quickly managed to stabilise prices and secure supply. We are now on the path to energy independence. But energy bills are still a real source of anxiety for millions of Europeans. And costs are still structurally high for industry. We know what drove prices up: **dependency on Russian fossil fuels**. So it is time to **get rid of dirty Russian fossil fuels**. And we know, what brings prices down: **clean homegrown energy**. We need to generate **more**

homegrown renewables – with nuclear as a baseload. But we also need to urgently modernise and invest in our **infrastructure and our interconnectors.**

This is why we will propose a new **Grids Package** to strengthen our grid infrastructure and speed up permitting. And to go with that, I am presenting today a new initiative called **Energy Highways.** We have identified eight critical bottlenecks in our energy infrastructure. From the Øresund Strait to the Sicilian Canal. We will now work to remove these bottlenecks one by one. We will bring governments and utilities together, to address all outstanding issues. Because Europeans need affordable energy right now.

Honourable Members,

A home is not just four walls and a roof. It is safety, warmth, a place for family and friends. It is belonging. But for too many Europeans today, home has become a source of anxiety. It can mean debt or uncertainty. The numbers tell a painful truth. House prices are up by more than 20% since 2015. Building permits down by over 20% in five years. This is more than a housing crisis. It is a social crisis. It tears at Europe's social fabric. It weakens our cohesion. And it also threatens our competitiveness. Nurses, teachers, and firemen cannot afford to live where they serve. Students drop out because they cannot pay the rent. Young people delay starting families.

That is why still this year – after receiving your input, we will present the first ever **European Affordable Housing Plan.** To make housing more affordable, more sustainable, and of better quality. It will be a European effort, anchored in local realities. We need a radical overhaul of the way we tackle this issue. We need to **revise our State aid rules** to enable housing support measures. We need to make it much easier to **build new houses and student residences.** And we will also propose a legal initiative on **short-term rentals** to tackle the remaining issues. We need **all of society**, all lawmakers and all stakeholders to come together. In this spirit, we will **convene the first EU Housing Summit** to ensure it is at the top of our agenda.

Honourable Members,

Housing is about dignity. It is about fairness. And it is about Europe's future. **Eight years ago, the European Pillar of Social Rights made housing a social right in Europe. It's time to turn this promise into reality.**

The third example I would like to highlight is cars. It is a pillar of our economy and industry. A European pride. Millions of jobs depend on it. Earlier this year, we gave the sector more flexibility to reach their 2025 targets. This is working. And with respect for technology neutrality, we are now preparing the 2035 review. And millions of Europeans want to buy affordable European cars. So we should also invest in small, affordable vehicles. Both for the European market, but also to meet the surge in global demand.

This is why we will propose to work with industry on a new **Small Affordable Cars initiative.** I believe Europe should have its own E-car. E for environmental – clean, efficient and lightweight. E for economical – affordable for people. E for European – built here in Europe, with European supply chains. Because we cannot let China and others conquer this market. No matter what, the future is electric. And Europe will be part of it. **The future of cars – and the cars of the future – must be made in Europe.**

Honourable Members,

The final example I want to highlight is linked to food. In Europe, we have access to high-quality food that our outstanding farmers and fishers produce at affordable prices. They are also the custodians of our lands and oceans, our biodiversity. The key to our food security. But they are facing headwinds – from high input costs to red tape or unfair competition. We are acting on all those fronts. We have simplified the CAP – less paperwork and more trust. We have ringfenced income support in the next MFF. And made sure that funding can be topped up by national and regional envelopes.

But our farmers need fair competition and a level playing field. This is essential. This is why we have robust safeguards in our trade deal with Mercosur – backed up by funding if compensation is needed. We also need to strengthen the position of farmers in the food chain. For too long their hard work has not paid off as it should. **Farmers have a right to a fair price for their food – and a fair profit for their families.** We will review the **implementation on our unfair trading practices legislation.** And take action wherever it is needed. And I can also announce today that we will **boost**

our promotion budget to launch a new “Buy European food” campaign. Because we can proudly say that our European food is the best in the world.

Honourable Members,

When we talk about competitiveness and independence we must talk about our relations with the United States. I have heard many things about the deal we agreed on over the summer. I understand the initial reactions. So allow me to be as clear I can. Our trading relationship with the US is our most important. We export over EUR 500 billion worth of goods to the US every year. Millions of jobs depend on it. As President of the Commission, I will never gamble with people's jobs or livelihoods. This is why we did a deal to keep market access for our industries. And we ensured that Europe got the best possible deal out there. We have put our companies at a relative advantage. Because some of our direct competitors face much higher US tariffs. Yes, their baseline may be lower.

But when you account for the exceptions that we secured and the additional rates which others have on top – we have the best agreement. Without any doubt. And I want to be crystal clear on one point: Whether on environmental or digital regulation. We set our own standards. We set our own regulations. Europe will always decide for itself.

Honourable Members,

I do not believe in tariffs. Tariffs are taxes. But the deal provides crucial stability in our relations with the US at a time of grave global insecurity. Think of the repercussions of a full-fledged trade war with the US. Picture the chaos. And then put that image next to the one from China just last week. China flanked by the Leaders of Russia and North Korea. Putin gloating about how Russia-China relations are at an unprecedented high. None of this is a great surprise. But it reflects the changing landscape. And it creates two imperatives for Europe's independence push and its place in the world.

The first is that we need to **double down on diversification and partnerships**. 80% of our trade is with countries other than the US. So we need to capitalise on new opportunities. At a time when the global trading system is crumbling, we are securing the global rules through bilateral agreements. Like with **Mexico** or **Mercosur**. Or finalising negotiations on a historic deal with India by the end of this year.

We will also build a **coalition of like-minded countries** to reform the global trading system – **like the CPTPP**. Because trade allows us to strengthen our supply chains. Open up markets. Reduce dependencies. Ultimately, this is about enhancing our **economic security**. The world wants to **Choose Europe**. And we need to do business with the world.

The second imperative is – for Europe to step up where others have stepped away. Take research. **Science has no passport, gender, ethnicity or political colour**. It is one of the most valuable global goods. This is why the Commission announced a **Choose Europe package** of EUR 500 million to attract and retain the best scientists and researchers. And Europe must also take the lead on global health. We are on the brink – or even at the start – of another **global health crisis**. As a medical doctor by training, I am appalled by the disinformation that threatens global progress on everything **from measles to polio**. And this is why today I can announce that the EU will head a new **Global Health Resilience Initiative**. Because the world is looking to Europe – and **Europe is ready to lead**.

Honourable Members,

Europe's independence is about protecting our freedoms. The freedom to decide. To speak out. To move around a whole continent. The freedom to vote. To love. To pray. To live in a Union of equality. Our democracy and the rule of law are the guarantors of those freedoms. This is why we have done so much to strengthen our tools and step-up enforcement. We built a new rule of law cycle that ensures that problems are detected early and solved through engagement.

We need an integrated annual cycle on the rule of law – a common rhythm, clear milestones, and contributions from all institutions. And our focus must be to close the existing loopholes. We have strengthened the link between funds and respect for the rule of law. And with the next long-term budget we will go even further. **Respecting the rule of law is a must for EU funds. Now and in the future.**

Our democracy is under attack. The rise in information manipulation and disinformation is dividing our

societies. It is not only eroding trust in the truth – but also in democracy itself. This is why we urgently need the **European Democracy Shield**. We need more capacity to monitor and detect information manipulation and disinformation. So we will set up a new **European Centre for Democratic Resilience**. This will bring together all the expertise and capacity across Member States and neighbouring countries.

Honourable Members,

In some communities across Europe, **traditional media are struggling**. In many rural areas, the days of going out for a local paper is a nostalgic memory. This has created many **news deserts** where disinformation thrives. And this is very dangerous for our democracy. Because informed citizens who can trust what they read and hear are essential to keep those-in-power accountable. And when independent media are dismantled or neutralised, our ability to monitor corruption and preserve democracy is severely weakened. This is why the first step in an **autocrat's playbook** is always to **capture independent media. Because this enables backsliding and corruption to happen in the dark**. So we need to do more to protect our media and independent press.

This is why we will launch a new **Media Resilience Programme** – it will support independent journalism and media literacy. But we also need to invest to address some of the root causes of this trend. This is why in the next budget, we have proposed to significantly boost funding for media. We also need to enable private equity. We will therefore use our tools to support **independent and local media. A free press is the backbone of any democracy. And we will support Europe's press to remain free**.

Honourable Members,

The same goes for social media. It has so many benefits for connecting people. But I would like to raise one specific topic. And this is the effects of giving our **children unfettered access** to social media. As a mother of seven, and a grandmother of four, I feel the anxiety of parents who are doing their best to keep their children safe. These parents worry that when their children pick up a phone they could be exposed to the wide-ranging dangers, simply with a scroll.

Online bullying. Adult content. Promoting self-harm. And **algorithms** that prey on children's vulnerabilities with the **explicit purpose of creating addictions**. Too often mums and dads feel powerless and helpless. That they are drowning against the tsunami of Big Tech flooding their family homes.

I strongly believe that **parents, not algorithms**, should be raising our children. Their voice must be heard. This is why today I am here to tell you that I am listening. Just as in my days – we as a society – taught our children that they could not smoke, drink and watch adult content until a certain age. I believe it is time we consider doing the same for social media. **Our friends in Australia are pioneering a social media restriction**. I am watching the implementation of their policy closely to see what next steps we can take here in Europe.

I will commission a **panel of experts** to advise me by the end of this year on the best approach for Europe. We will approach this **carefully** and listen to everyone. And in all of this work we will be guided by the need to empower parents and build a safer Europe for our children. **Because when it comes to our kids' safety online, Europe believes in parents, not profits**.

Honourable Members,

Our most important task is to protect our democracy. But to do so we must also show that democracy offers solutions to people's legitimate concerns. And nowhere is that more evident than in the context of **migration**. This is why we have proposed to treble funding for migration and border management in the next budget. So that we can manage migration effectively and protect our external borders.

But more is clearly needed. The people of Europe have shown they are willing to help those fleeing war and persecution. But there is a growing sense of frustration, stemming from their impression that our rules are being ignored. This is why we need to step up our efforts. We need a system that is humane, but we must not be naïve about it. We must be serious about returning rejected asylum seekers to their home countries.

We cannot have a situation where only 20 percent of those who are not allowed to stay actually leave Europe. We therefore need to agree quickly on the **Common European System for Returns**. We

have no more time to lose. And we must also ensure that we fully implement the **Pact on Migration and Asylum** as soon as it enters into force. The pact is strict but fair. And it will only work if everyone plays their part. Member States from the north and the south, the east and the west.

Of course, we shall always fulfil our international obligations. But we in Europe must be the ones to decide who comes to us and in what circumstances, not the people-smugglers and traffickers. They are making millions upon millions with their cynical, false and fatal promises. That is why we must break their business model.

It is true that numbers are falling but too many people are still trying to cross the border illegally and are dying on the way. We must work together with social media platforms to put an end to the online organisation and online advertising of smuggling operations. We must work more closely with airlines, especially on problematic routes such as those to Belarus. And it is only by going after the money that we will be able to track down the criminal networks and cut off their sources of funding. **And we need a new system of sanctions specifically targeted at people smugglers and traffickers.** To freeze their assets. To restrict their ability to move around. To cut off their profits. People smuggling is a horrible, criminal business, and no smuggler should be allowed to get away with it in Europe.

Honourable Members,

The point I want to make is simple. If it matters to Europeans, it matters to Europe. This is our enduring duty to deliver. This summer, we all saw the pictures of Europe's forests and villages on fire. More than a million hectares were burned. An area around a third of the size of Belgium. The scale of the damage is enormous. And we know it is not a one off. Climate change is making each summer hotter, harsher, and more dangerous. This is why we have to radically step up our efforts into climate resilience and adaptation, and nature-based solutions. But we must also give ourselves the tools to respond.

This is why we will propose to create a new **European firefighting hub** based in Cyprus, which could also support our regional neighbours. We know the difference our Civil Protection Mechanism can make. Over the summer, 760 brave Europeans were sent to all corners of Europe. Literally running towards the flames. And I would like to conclude my speech with a tribute to them – the firefighters, pilots, crews. Everyone who stepped up.

I would like to tell you the story of a group of 20 Greek rangers. They are specialists in taming the fiercest of forest fires. When the fires erupted in the Asturias region, Spain called for Europe's support. And Greece answered the call. The flames were so vast the smoke could be seen from space. But for five days the 20 Greek rangers stood shoulder to shoulder with their Spanish colleagues. As the flames swept closer to the village of Genestoso, they fought day and night to contain the inferno. And in the end – together – they tamed the fire, and the village was saved.

Honourable Members,

It is such an honour to welcome one of these heroes today. The leader of the Greek team, Lieutenant Nikolaos Paisios. Lieutenant, dear Nikolaos, your courage is an inspiration to us all. For your strength, your commitment, and your extraordinary leadership: *ευχαριστώ* – to you and your team of European heroes.

Honourable Members,

This is Europe as one community. This is the Europe that I love. This is the Europe that we must protect at all costs. And we must do that together. I want to work with this House and with all pro-European democratic forces to deliver for Europeans.

I am working on legislative packages to empower this pro-European majority. And I am so delighted, dear Roberta, that we have managed to renew the **Framework Agreement** between the Commission and Parliament. This will only strengthen our cooperation. And it will be an enabler for us to work on the real reforms that are needed. Because I support **the right of initiative** of the European Parliament. And I believe that we need to move to qualified majority in some areas, for example in foreign policy. **It is time to break free from the shackles of unanimity.**

The point is that we need to make sure our Union is faster and can deliver for Europeans. Because this is how we can win this fight together. To deliver Europe's independence moments. And let's

remember that we have always had to fight for our freedoms. From the generation that fought hand to hand across our Continent. To the underground press that kept the flame of freedom alive across Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Or the Forest Brothers in the Baltics who resisted Soviet oppression at every turn. This struggle, this fight, is deeply engrained in who we are as Europeans. 80 years ago our Continent was hell on earth. 40 years ago our Continent was divided by a Wall. But on each occasion, Europeans decided to fight for a better future. To make itself whole – and to make the whole strong. And this is what I will strive for every single day.

Long live Europe.

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